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Debate: Towards a more comprehensive understanding of ritualized bureaucracy in digitalized public organizations

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Often, technology enforces new types of red tape to abolish older forms of red tape (Peled, 2001, p. 424).

Rules and regulations that require follow up, but serve no direct functional purpose—referred to in the literature on ritualized bureaucracy as ‘red tape’—afflict public organizations worldwide (Bozeman, 2012; Kaufmann et al., 2018; Lodge & Wegrich, 2009). While many rules and regulations have their merits, red tape limits the available space for innovative ideas, deteriorates the organizational culture and weighs in on employees’ work satisfaction and their intention to continue working for the organization (George et al., forthcoming).

So are public organizations powerless against red tape? Many thought a solution was within reach with the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT) in public organizations. Expectations were that red tape would be eradicated, or at least severely reduced (Kim et al., 2014). However, despite significant investments in ICT (Mergel et al., 2019), red tape remains a pathology in digitalized public organizations. This comes as no surprise, given Bozeman and Youtie’s (2020) warning about the risk of ICT not reducing, but ‘automating’ red tape through bureaucratic software. Indeed, nowadays, compliance to (dys)functional rules and procedures occurs digitally, supported by ICT or other technologies. Think about ill-designed, outdated, e-portals curtailing leeway for personnel administration; the panoply of steps for travel cost reimbursements and tax filing; or the endless lists of PDF manuals and hard-to-find forms on intranets!

The transformation of red tape

However, the perspective that ICT solely reproduces bureaucratic red tape is shortsighted. In support, White (2015) argues that digitalization is the breeding ground for more complex forms of red tape. For instance, there is the self-reinforcing nature

instigating complexity. Public organizations often adopt novel ICT in response to red tape, but also call into life new rules and procedures to regulate their use, prompting these organizations to invest in new ICT. As older ICT is replaced, past rules and procedures often become dysfunctional (Peled, 2001). Moreover, the new forms of red tape also seem to be more persistent. Rules and procedures originating from ICT are often more difficult to attribute to a particular person or organization (Bozeman & Youtie, 2020). Therefore, according to Peled (2001, p. 425), public organizations:

No longer benefit from ‘creative destruction’ opportunities. [They] are expected to ‘bootstrap’ themselves from remotely stored electronic backup sets, to restore immediately every data element and software-coded rule, and to reinstate the same inertia-driven world that existed before.

The importance of understanding digital red tape

We advocate that dysfunctional rules and regulations fostering compliance burden through their connection to, or embeddedness in, modern ICT constitute ‘digital red tape’. In this article we argue, based on adaptive structuration theory (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994), that considering the interaction between people and technologies is key to understanding digital red tape as a distinct form of red tape (Thatcher et al., 2006). Specifically, within organizations, the relation of ICT and modern technologies with organizational processes and performances is mediated by the attitudes and behaviours of their users. In doing, users adopt these technologies according to certain values, beliefs or organizational mindset, creating a new synthesis. Hence, since digital red tape is red tape embedded in ICT and modern technology, it is a particular synthesis resulting from the interaction between users and technology. Given the existence of

different kinds of red tape (for example general versus personnel red tape; see Bozeman, 2012), addressing digital red tape is necessary to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of red tape in public organizations in the process of digitalization (Kim et al., 2014).

Considering the need for more conceptual innovation in red tape research (Bozeman & Feeney, 2014), it is surprising that public administration scholarship has largely ignored experiences of red tape in the modern digitalized workplace. With this debate article, we hope to close this gap and draw the attention of public management scholars towards recent, digital forms of red tape that permeate present-day public organizations. Responding to this call might be an important step to the further integration of ICT into contemporary debates in public management literature (Yildiz, 2012).

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